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Discussion, Intervention, Processing: Theatre and Citizenship in Nigeria

A defining characteristic of 'Theatre for Development' is its 'unfinished' quality, whereby plays or scenarios remain more or less ongoing dialogues. In the following article, Samuel Ayedime Kafewo discusses the relationship between the fiction of the performance and the reality of the performed issues in one drama based on this technique, concerned with the divisive issue of citizenship rights in Nigeria. What is the role of processing and intervention in encouraging new attitudes towards the citizenship issues tackled in the project? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies adopted? And what was the overall impact of the project, 'Citizenship, Participation, and Accountability', as undertaken by the Theatre for Development Centre and the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance in 2001–2002 in Kaduna State, north-western Nigeria? Samuel Ayedime Kafewo is an active member of the Zaria Popular Theatre/Theatre for Development movement. He is Reader in the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, and has published extensively in both local and international journals.

NIGERIA's recent journey into another process of democratization is raising critical questions of citizenship, in view of the country's huge social diversity and deep ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. In the light of this, the Theatre for Development Centre of Ahmadu Bello University and the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance, a non-governmental organization based in Zaria, sought to draw out the issues of identity, belonging, entitlement, governance, and resources that underlie questions of citizenship in Nigeria through an action-research process using Theatre for Development and other participatory methodologies.

Here I wish to examine the theories behind the methodology used in the research, its strengths and weaknesses, and the overall impact of one of such project, 'Citizenship, Participation, and Accountability', undertaken by the Theatre for Development Centre and the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance in Kaduna State during 2001 and 2002.

The roots of Theatre for Development as currently practised in Nigeria, as in many parts of the Third World, derive rather from Marxism than the canons of Aristotle. The Marxist view of society as structured along class divisions occasioned by economic forces also insists on a dialectical relationship between theatre and society. Marxism codifies its societal analysis on the failings of capitalism and the vision of an alternative, more egalitarian society. While Marxism never laid down formal theories of artistic production, the philosophical assumptions that underlie its theory of economic production also govern its view of art.

The principles of Marxist poetics draw on the declaration in the *Communist Manifesto* of what Marx and Engels wanted art to reflect:

> The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles; freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman – in a word, oppressor–oppressed – stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

The main features of Marxist aesthetics are summed up by Chidi Amuta as follows:

- A connection between art/literature and the material base, defined in terms of the totality of the relations of production.

 NTQ 25:2 (MAY 2009) © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X0900027X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X0900027X Published online by Cambridge University Press

- The class basis of art and the progressive nature of proletarian art.
- The dialectical relationship between content and form.
- The recognition of realism as the most appropriate form of artistic representation.

(Amuta, 1986, p. 36)

It is these ideas that Brecht imbibed and propagated in his writings and his practice. But while Theatre for Development may be close to Marxist ideas in its revolutionary intent, we have to look beyond Marx to explain its practice. As a form of theatre which employs a variety of expressions of the people at grassroots level to analyze development problems and to create critical awareness and potential for action to solve those problems, it is an advance over Marxist theory in the practical involvement it requires.

Brecht, Freire, and Boal

Augusto Boal in evolving his techniques went further than Brecht by working with the common man on the street; for apart from a few attempts to take plays to factory workers, Brecht concentrated and developed his theory in conventional theatre. Boal's theatrical practice, though essentially Marxist in orientation, also borrows extensively from the educational philosophy of his compatriot Paulo Freire; and the combination of Freire's ideas and Brecht's practice gave birth to Boal's *Poetics of the Oppressed*.

Freire, one of the principal influences on Boal, has had a profound impact also in the field of education and the overall struggle for national development. As he said:

> There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.
>
> (Freire, 1982, p. 8)

Freire's is the response of a creative mind to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed around him. He started from the premise of how traditional learning approaches have led to what he calls 'the culture of silence'. He believed that the ignorance and inaction of the oppressed were direct products of the economic, social, and political domination of the elite – a situation that is reinforced by the paternalistic nature of the educational system.

Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sought to encourage and equip the masses to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world instead of being kept 'submerged' in a situation where critical awareness and response 'were practically impossible'. Thus evolved 'conscientization', which in Freire's own words involves

> learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. (Freire, 1982, p. 15)

Freire worked from the basic assumption that 'man's ontological vocation' is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world. In so doing man can move towards new possibilities of a fuller and a richer life both individually and collectively.

This world is not closed, static, and handed down; rather, in a dialogic manner, no matter how 'ignorant' and submerged in the 'culture of silence', man is capable of looking critically at his world. Through this dialogue, perceptions of social reality leading to change can emerge and supplant the paternalistic teacher–student relationship in formal education.

Boal sought to advance the Freirian dialogue towards genuine emancipation by the use of theatre. He first located theatre firmly in the realm of politics, questioning views of its role that go back to Aristotle, and are rooted in membership of a privileged class:

> The theatre, in particular, is determined by society much more stridently than the other arts because of its immediate contact with the public, and its power to convince. . . . The state and the wealthy financed the production of tragedies. They therefore would not permit the performance of plays whose content would run counter to state policy or to the interest of the governing class.
>
> (Boal, 1979, p. 53–4)

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Boal thus moved for the de-aristocratization of the theatre – which needed to go back to a pre-Aristotelian popular state of being a feast, with people singing and dancing freely. What this calls for is popular participation, its negotiations not only enhanced but determined by the people. Instead of a predetermined agenda where audiences are directed towards a point of view or invited to take a critical look, the people themselves initiate the action.

> In the beginning, the theatre was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in open air. The carnival, the feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theatre and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators, people who act and people who watch; secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonist from the mass. The coercive intimidation began. Now the oppressed people have liberated themselves. . . . The walls must be torn down. The spectator starts acting again in visible theatre, forum theatre, image theatre etc. Secondly, it is necessary to eliminate the private property of the characters by the individual actor: the joker system. (Boal, 1979, p. 129)

Thus Boal, like Brecht, believes that theatre must engender a different form of negotiation from the Aristotelian tradition. But he departs from Brecht in encouraging not just critical thinking but immediate action and involvement or intervention by 'spect-actors'. Boal does not just encourage critical thinking for later action, but requires an immediate reconstruction of reality.

The emphasis in Boal's theatre is on action. No more is power delegated to the actor/character, but instead the audience assumes the protagonistic role. In the process true discourses may emerge leading to events that make greater meaning for the spectator.

I am not of course suggesting that the method derived from this, and which we will discuss shortly, is peculiar to this project or to Nigeria. Far from it. As the most interactive art form, drama – and in particular Theatre for Development – has been used for a long time in liberating the voice of the people. In Asia and Latin America, popular theatre forms were used by national liberation movements to confront forces that subjected them to poverty and misery. Boal's theory grew out of his extensive practice in his native Brazil and other parts of Latin America. In the Philippines, the community theatre movement made theatre an agent for social organization. In Nicaragua, Nidia Bustos declared that revolution is also made by writing poetry and by organizing popular education. In so doing, the cultural arm of the movement moved among the peasants, ensuring the growth of a dynamic people's culture.

The Role of Theatre for Development

The entry of Theatre for Development into Africa came about as a result of people's awareness of exploitation from oppressive minorities who were undermining popular welfare. Its first inroads into Africa came in Botswana, from where it spread rapidly to Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania . . . The practice has had a profound impact in a number of places: Ngugi's experiments in Kenya with Kamrithu peasants, using the events of 1977 to make definitive statements about exploitative relations in modern Kenya, come readily to mind, as do the LEARN (Local Educational Activities of Rural Network) projects in Sierra Leone, conducted between 1979 and 1983.

Successful popular theatre or Theatre for Development experiments have taken place in Nigeria since the form found a place in the academic curriculum of Ahmadu Bello University. Practised since 1975, it has established itself firmly as an academic discipline not in abstraction but as an instrument of instigating people-centred development in fields outside the academy (Abah, 2003, p. xiv). It has not only taken root in other universities in Nigeria, but has now been used in addressing development issues from Katsina Ala to Mushin.

A defining characteristic of this theatre is that it is unfinished (Etherton, 1988). The structure of the plays ensures that both the performance and the post-performance discussions are ongoing dialogues. Emphasis is

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laid on the process. No attempt is made to 'end' the performance. There are no quick-fix solutions in the performances. A disturbing trend however in some of the experiments is that the people become mere depositories – 'empty pots' in Freire's words – and as such these projects are faulted and the outcomes less than satisfactory. This happens when post-performance discussions become no more than an afterthought.

The crux is intervention and processing in which the spectators do not necessarily wait until the play ends: simultaneous staging or processing (Forum). This technique enables the clarification of issues and presentation of different arguments (Mda, 1993; Abah, 1997 and 2003; Harding 1999). Our interest therefore is in defining the intrinsic relationship between the fiction of the performance and the reality of the performed issues in a drama based on this technique. What is the role of processing and intervention in building new perspectives on the citizenship issues tackled in this project? Can these new ways of seeing lead to action both within the fiction and in reality?

The Citizenship Project

The Theatre for Development Centre is a research centre located in Ahmadu Bello University, while the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance was formed in March 1989 in Zaria after a workshop which brought together popular theatre animators. Its headquarters have remained in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria, but it operates in the six geopolitical zones of the country. Its mission statement runs thus:

> To facilitate ways of using popular theatre for development purposes. To seek the collaboration and support of national and international organizations in the collaboration and execution of projects in the search for solutions to rural and urban development problems in conjunction with their community development strategies.
>
> (Abah, 1994, p. 19)

In its first ten years of existence, utilizing theatre and other participatory methodologies to address mainly health and other rural development related issues, ranging from women's health to agriculture, and from the environment to HIV/Aids awareness campaigns, the organization has gradually shifted to politics, governance, conflict resolution and transformation, as evidenced from the workshops since 1999 which have covered 'Democracy and Governance', 'Citizenship, Participation, and Accountability', 'Building Bridges', and 'For Tomorrow', which used theatre to address issues of adolescent sexuality.

The Citizenship Project, executed with a grant and in collaboration with the Institute of Development Research of the University of Sussex, aimed at exploring different people's understanding of citizenship and the various ways in which citizenship may determine rights and privileges in Nigeria in the light of factors such as location/space, ethnicity, gender, religion, the legal/formal context, and the historical processes which led to the unification of Nigeria's different nationalities into one country.

The project used a variety of participatory methodologies, including, among other 'Participatory Learning and Action' tools, transect work, oral testimony, Venn diagrams, activity profiles, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KII), Evaluation Wheel, and Force Field Analysis. These tools were forerunners to citizenship drama, for the materials derived from the research flowed into the drama, which instigated the discussion in the field.

The Agaba Scenario

The story line of the drama for the project ran thus:

CHAIRMAN'S OFFICE: COUNCIL MEETING

Councillors are already seated, discussing issues arising from their various wards. There is unofficial news that the allocation has arrived from headquarters. The Chairman walks in with a serious, arrogant air. All stand to welcome him with various forms of greeting. Some bow, genuflect, rankadede, etc. The Chairman sits and motions them to do same. He introduces the day's agenda and proceeds to present the projects at hand, all of which are for his own selfish ends.

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Councillors grumble, a few support him. He shuts them up and warns against any act of protest. 'After all, I bought both the electorate and you councillors – how do I recover my money?'

The Councillors shrink, some apologize for daring to ask questions, some are speechless; one of the more vocal tries to find his tongue to comment on the nature of the treatment they receive from the Chairman but . . .

During this confusion, a Contractor walks in. This character is the sponsor and godfather of the Chairman. Everybody including the Chairman stands up. The Chairman symbolically offers him his seat, ordering everybody to take a break.

The Chairman discusses the allocation with the Contractor. After taking the lion's share themselves, they now discuss the sharing formula among the councillors based on allegiance. The 'dividends of democracy' are neatly packaged on each councillor's seat as the bell summons them back from the emergency break. There is protest from some at the disproportionate sharing while a few protest at the inappropriateness of sharing the allocation at all.

While this argument is going on, Agaba storms in with his wife and children, brandishing a cutlass. The Councillor from his ward attempts to calm him down and asks what the problem is.

Agaba narrates his problem demanding to know why his children should be denied education on the basis on being labelled non-indigenes. Reactions differ:

First: 'Go back to your own village and claim citizenship.'

Second: 'Agaba has a case and should be heard.'

Agaba reacts at this point to say that he has made many contributions towards the development of the community and a number of investments as well.

Third, the Chairman: 'The money he used for all his claims was made in the community. So what is the noise about? After all a street cat can never be like a house cat.'

Agaba, deflated, finally ask this question: 'If I don't belong here, where do these children belong?'

From Intervention to Processing

Let us locate the landscapes that produce the scenario of this drama. A foremost Nigerian nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, asserted (1947, p. 47) that Nigeria as presently constituted is 'a mere geographical expression' and that 'in terms of social relationships and national identification, one could not speak of Nigeria in the same sense as one could speak of its components as Kano Emirate, or Kingdom of Ife or Benin' (Otite, 1975, p. 3). Or as Okwori more audaciously declares, and we cannot but agree:

> Nigeria is no more than a patchwork of colonial creation. That Nigeria is such a patchwork underscores the crisis of citizenship, participation, and accountability that bedevils the republic.
>
> (Okwori, 2003, p. 1)

Thus the crisis that continues to plague the Nigerian state, as played out in this scenario, concerns what we might refer to as the limits of political engineering. As a deliberate colonial strategy, the agenda of Sir George Goldie and his Royal Niger Company, in complicity with the British colonial authorities, brought various ethnic groups and kingdoms together from the old patchwork of protectorates and colonies. However, forgotten by the authors of amalgamation, whether by default or more probably design, was the fact that each of the protectorates 'was a sprawling territory of separate ethno-linguistic groups, each with its own distinctive history, language, social custom, and beliefs'. Nigeria is thus a veritable mosaic of nationalities, and has within its borders several hundred ethnic groups with distinct languages and cultures (Okechie-Offoha, 1996, p. 1).

The colonial powers not only promoted these divisions but actively encouraged them as long as it suited their purpose. Thus, at independence in 1960 the British handed over power to a fragmented country, and the regions became rallying points of identity only as far as this enabled them to seek for a share of the the national cake.

The North, which was the largest of the regions, rallied its middle belt and minority populations as a counterweight to the East

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and South, which were more advanced by western standards. However, the umbrella of being called northerners collapsed once it came to equality among the ethnic nationalities of the region, and religion became the criterion for qualifying as a 'true' northerner. In extreme cases, even a profession of the Islamic religion from middle-belt converts would not suffice.

The East and West had their own battles between the Igbos and Yorubas and other minority ethnic groups in their areas. Thus Nigeria has been a landscape of citizens at war with each other. The seeds sown earlier by the colonial masters, watered by the politicians at independence and the generations following, have continued to ensure that the conflict bertween the 'foreigner' and the indigene persists among citizens of the same country.

Nigeria must rank as one of the few countries of the world where, even if you are born in a state or have lived and worked there all your life, so long as it is not classified as your state of origin, you are deemed a foreigner, and so discriminated against in the provision of employment, access to education, and other basic entitlements. In some places, when offered employment at all, it will be on contract – the same status as an applicant from a foreign country (Nnoli, 1995, p. 191). The 'northernization' policy as defined in 1957 by the public service commission of the Northern Region provides a useful insight:

> If a qualified northerner is available, he is given priority in recruitment; if no qualified northerner is available, an expatriate may be recruited or a non-northerner on contract terms

Note that in some cases the definition can be hazy. A certified Muslim from the Niger Republic may be preferred to a Christian or an animist from the middle belt. This was the world or society that gave birth to the Agaba scenario described above.

Performing in Kargi

Kargi is a small town about five kilometres to the north of Anchau, the local government headquarters of the Kubau Council in Kaduna state. It is a predominantly Islamic community, though there are Christians and adherents of other religions, and strangers or settlers like our Agaba.

Since our performance there was on a Friday, we decided to work with the rhythm of the community by fixing the performance immediately after the prayers. Leaving our encampment at the Women's Development Centre in the Hakimi's Palace, we found people just leaving the mosque. Our guide, Abdullahi Kargi, intercepted the Imam to invite him for the performance, including the Hakimi and his entourage. Accepting the invitation, they quickly formed a half-moon in front of the mosque which became defined as our stage and performance area.

A crucial difference between Theatre for Development and conventional theatre is the locale of the dramatic event.

> The movement towards the opening up and loosening the proxemic relations in performance, in order to escape from the tyranny of architectonic grandeur and its aesthetic and ideological implications, looks back to the earlier and non-institutional forms of performance where fixed feature space was . . . non-existent.
>
> (Elam, 1979, p. 64–5)

So we took the drama to the heart of the people. How does this affect perception? At the 'end' of the drama, when Agaba asks, 'If I don't belong here, what of these children, where do they belong?' the audience was divided. Some said 'Kargi' while others said 'His state.' This is the reality of citizenship in Nigeria. Agaba is an Idoma, defined by the constitution and his ancestry as coming from Benue State; so no matter how long he has lived in Kargi, in Kaduna State he can never claim to be an indigene.

There are times when the performance space can either aid positive communication or reinforce existing values; and here the mosque became a focus for the denial or conferment of citizenship. Obviously, Agaba lost out both in the fictive world of the play and in reality. The courtiers gathered in front of the mosque will not include an Agaba, so what case does he have? True the consti-

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tution does not specify where one should or should not live, but an Agaba on a Friday not following other dominant members of the community to the mosque has a poor case if he runs to the Sarki complaining that his children are being denied education. That is the brutal truth in Nigeria today

The Sidelining of Women and Children

But that is only a part of the matter What about Agaba's children, born and bred in the environment where he has lived, married, and to which he has contributed in the last thirty years or more?

The reality in Nigeria today is that migration due to labour and the need to eke out a living take people from their ancestral land. They live in new communities and procreate, and in most cases their children may not even know the way to their ancestral villages; but as soon as they demand anything from the host community, they are quickly reminded that they are strangers.

In the citizenship equation in Nigeria, the woman bears the brunt. While discrimination and denial of citizenship is pervasive, the woman's burden is double. Advances in the areas of western education and other factors have not removed the inferior status conferred on women, who are still regarded as second-class citizens. The moment a woman marries, she loses her identity. The mother of Agaba's children could not save him or confer citizenship on their offspring.

One man argued that a woman can go with any man, that when she has a daughter she is not considered as a child, just like the useless girl who married Agaba and is now deluding him into claiming to be an indigene. We should note again the conspiracy between the fictive world and reality. The audience made up of men from their Friday prayers obviously already excludes women, since women do not go to pray in the same mosque on Friday as the men; so how can a woman come to matter enough to confer citizenship on Agaba's children?

What is more, even the real audience composition of the drama does not include women, since they can only peep over the walls of the houses where they have been secluded by their men. So when the issue of the eligibility of Agaba's children for citizenship by virtue of their mother is raised, there is not even a woman present to voice her case. In predominantly Islamic settings the woman is at best seen and never heard, but in extreme cases neither seen or heard.

The situation in Nigeria is harshest in the North. An observation of Chief Obafemi Awolowo is again pertinent here:

> A deep religious gulf runs between the northern (Hausa-Fulani) and Southern (Igbo and Yoruba) portions of the country. The people of the south approach religion with remarkable moderation and nonchalance. Christians, Mohammedans, and the so-called pagans mix in society without restraint. The people of the north are extremely fanatical about Islamism They have open contempt for those who do not share their religious beliefs. (Awolowo, 1947, p. 49)

So the lot of Agaba is shared by his wife, even though she herself comes from the local area. In her case this does not matter, since she was born a woman. Some members of the audience were ready to concede that at least the children are indigenes, but were vehemently opposed to any attempt to confer that status on Agaba.

All those who offered to re-enact the drama brought their own perception to bear. One man represented a majority of the younger generation in his opinion that according to the constitution Agaba was qualified to be an indigene with all the rights and privileges; and some of the young men even proceeded to build a play the following day where a non-indigene like Agaba, who had lived in the community and contributed to its development, not only contested an election but won. An outcome in reality is likely to be very different.

While the debate lasted, and from the point the Joker transformed the drama into a court, the Hakimi and his acolytes – those who really control the community and determine what goes on – simply observed. When Agaba moved from the fiction of the drama and took his case to the Hakimi, what response did he get? Abah and Okwori take up the account:

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It was a citizenship court of *Sarakuna* (royalty). The *Murya* (voice) that we heard from now on was no longer of dialogue in fiction; it was a pronouncement of verdict from the bowels of authority and conviction. The *Hakimi* maintained a stolid silence; the *Imam* stayed placid; but the *Sarki* talked only in monosyllables and crisp phrases. The identity issue and the question of entitlements, who could claim citizenship in this place and whether or not Agaba could claim rights, were being enunciated. When the *Hakimi* said nothing it was not lack of interest, when the *Imam* remained inscrutable it was not shortage of opinion or lack of knowledge of the issues.

(Abah and Okwori, 2003, p. 135)

While it can be said that the Hakimi was obeying the cultural injunction which forbids him from speaking with commoners during public petitions such as this, it can be assumed that whatever the Sarki said had his blessings, right or wrong. And so Agaba in defeat turns to the Hakimi: 'The Chairman has declared me wild cat that is not like the real home cat even after living here for this long and contributing to this society, and the Hakimi through the Sarki said he has heard.'

This characterizes the citizenship dilemma in Nigeria. If an Abdullahi from Kargi had gone to a village in Idoma land he would receive the same treatment as would a Yoruba in Igbo land or vice versa. When those who should speak out, like the Hakimi, Oba, Obi, or any member of the elite by whatever definition choose to acquiesce, then it is clear that there is still far to go.

So the answers to the questions raised in the drama clearly lie beyond the drama. This is where Boal's Forum Theatre comes in, by providing for the role of a Joker to process the drama, whereby the bystander and spectator switch roles with the actor and try out their own suggested actions, with all the limitations of such suggestions exposed. This is certainly beyond conventional practice and even beyond Brecht's analysis for later action or the post-performance discussions of earlier practitioners of this kind of theatre

The wider context of the drama, which was overshadowed by the injustice done to Agaba, is what the Councillors were doing before Agaba stormed in. When a Chairman and Councillors behave like those we saw in the drama, openly sharing among themselves the resources that should be used to better the lives of the masses, there is always going to be underdevelopment. As one agitated spectator said, 'Why are we wasting time on Agaba, who refuses to go back to his own village, when we have seen in the drama that every member of the community is a potential Agaba, being cheated of the resources of the state by political looters?'

But the citizenship issue will not go away, and it manifests itself in different ways. The guide who took us round and facilitated our work in the village, Alhaji Abdullahi Kargi, comes from Bornu state, as is evident from his facial markings, but he is accepted as an indigene of Kargi, with a chieftaincy title to boot. Here citizenship is by religious affiliation and royal connections.

The crucial point is that this mode of building drama, though in its infancy, has generated discussion and perhaps glimpses of action to come. This is significant, for the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist of mere eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary moving of feelings and passions, but in an active participation in practical affairs, as a constructor, organizer, and 'permanent persuader' (Daniel, 1990, p. 46).

The strength of this project is that the research phase provided adequate information to feed a drama which the people easily identified with, and were able freely to discuss. Theatre for Development may not have provided all the answers and may have done no more than open up discussion of the Nigerian citizenship question; but if the people begin to listen – especially to the voice of the youths in Kargi – then we may be nearer the solution than we had feared.

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